

# Ph.D. Research Proposal Guidelines

## English, PolyU

The Ph.D. Research Proposal is a critical phase of the extended process of undertaking to do a Ph.D. It is the central part of your application to be admitted to a Ph.D. programme, and depending on the nature and quality of your proposal, you will either be admitted or not. It is critical you seek feedback from your future Ph.D. supervisor. To identify a supervisor please see our faculty's research areas page: <https://www.polyu.edu.hk/eng/research/research-overview>

The main goal of your research proposal is to demonstrate that your research would be both desirable and feasible to undertake — that it would make a positive difference to the research community (and even to the wider community), and to show that you are able to undertake the research that you propose, e.g. that you are familiar with the central aspects of the area of research within which the research you propose can be located. Previous experience with research will of course be very helpful to you, including courses on research methodology. You can also gain insights by reading about how to develop and write research proposals (see references below), and by reading a number of examples of research proposals, in particular — but not only — in your own area of research. Similarly, reviewing theses that have been submitted is a helpful way of developing a clear sense of the nature and scope of Ph.D. research.

It is helpful to think about a proposal for Ph.D. research in the same way you would think about a research proposal you produce in order to submit to some funding agency to seek a research grant: you are essentially asking for considerable support and resources, so you have to make a strong case that the research you propose merits the support and the resources and that you are well prepared to undertake it. You are of course making the heaviest investment yourself: you are proposing to devote 36 months of your working life to this project, so it should be one that really fascinates you and one that you can remain committed to for a considerable length of time.

Like all research proposals, your proposal for Ph.D. research will go through a number of draft versions before you finalize it and submit it as part of your application. If you are admitted, you can still change aspects of the research that you put forward in your proposal, in consultation with your supervisor and the Departmental Research Committee. It is quite normal in research projects that the execution of research plans will produce results that were not entirely predictable, so there will be good reason to adjust the research plan, particularly in the early stages of the research. This is one reason why it is helpful to build a pilot study into the overall research project.

When you write each section of the proposal, try to produce the most central or nuclear statements first so that the overall organization of the proposal is clear and easy to follow. Make sure you proofread the proposal carefully, using tools such as grammar and spell-checkers.

## Thesis title and research topic

Specify the **general area of research**, using recognized classifications as far as possible. The research classification can be stated in terms of field of research (e.g. language description, second language acquisition, sociolinguistics, lexicology, translation studies, multimodal studies), research methodology (e.g. text analysis, corpus-based research, questionnaire-based research, action research, experimentation), and theoretical approach (e.g. corpus linguistics, critical discourse analysis, systemic functional linguistics). The **major research areas in the Department** are:

- Language and Professional Communication
- Linguistics, English Language, and Systemic Functional Linguistics
- Language Teaching and Learning
- Media and Communication
- Area Studies and Intercultural Communications

Propose a **working title** for the thesis. As far as possible, the title should be **accessible** to scholars who are not specialists in the field of your research, so include transparent descriptive terms and avoid abbreviations in the title such as CDA, CA, LFG, SFL.

## Background of research

Review the **relevant literature** in your area of research, identifying up-to-date overviews of the state of the art of this area. You can do this either as part of the sketch of the development leading up to the research you are proposing or as a separate subsection. Show how you engage with the work by other researchers; do not just list their contributions. As far as possible, try to classify and interpret their work in relation to the development of the field. Then identify the research gaps that remain in relation to previous work.

## Aims of research

Outline the **aims** (goals, objectives) of the research you are proposing. Indicate what particular **problem** or **problems** that can be identified in the area of research you propose to address, giving references wherever possible. Explain how your research will help **solve** the problems — how it will constitute an **advance** over the current state of knowledge: an original contribution to the field you are working in. Keep in mind that the aims should be feasible relative to the time and resources at your disposal for the research.

It may be helpful to differentiate between the **main aim** of the research and **subsidiary aims** that you can derive from this main aim. The statement of your aims will be stronger if the aims are related to one another in a clear way instead of merely being listed.

When you consider the aims of your proposed research, it is helpful to keep in mind what a Ph.D. represents. The award of a Ph.D. indicates that the university (in this case PolyU) and the wider scholarly community acknowledge that you are a specialist in your field and that you possess a high level of scholarship and research skills. The thesis should constitute a new and significant contribution to knowledge and should contain work of a publishable standard.

## Research design and methodology

Explain your choice of a particular **theoretical foundation**, or selection of foundations, upon which you will base your research, indicating how your choice is justified in view of the aims that you have specified and in relation to the background of your research. Give references to key theoretical works relevant to your study.

Based on your choice of theoretical foundation, discuss what will constitute **data** in your research (naturally occurring samples of language, elicited samples of language, survey results, and so on) and what **methodology** or **methodologies** for obtaining and processing the data will be best suited to allow you to pursue your research aims.

The methodology may involve **methods** of different kinds, e.g. (1) ethnographic observation of naturally occurring texts and other activities in institutional settings, (2) sampling of naturally occurring texts (in their institutional settings), analysis of texts (manual analysis and/or automated analysis), interpretation of the results of the analysis; (3) the elicitation of text through some elicitation technique such as translation from another language; (4) the design and use of surveys and questionnaires; (5) experimentation of some form, as in psycholinguistic studies. Wherever possible, refer to discussions in the literature of relevant methodology, and/ or give examples of studies that have employed the kind of methodology you plan to use.

Given your choice of research methods, indicate what requirements for **resources** your research will involve (e.g. hardware and software requirements) and whether there are **ethical considerations** (e.g. the need to seek approval from participants in your research).

Your research proposal should include a formative **pilot study** — that is, a smaller study where you can demonstrate your design and methodology.

One central aspect of your methodology is the **time-line** of your research. Specify the basic phases and month-by-month timeframe of your research: the early work on formulating the research, surveying the literature and collecting the data, the data analysis, the interpretation of the results of the data analysis, and the production of the thesis itself. Be sure to give specific dates and goals for each date on your 36-month timeline.

## Significance and value of research

In the previous parts of your research proposal, you have indicated the scope of your research and indicated that it is feasible. Here your task is to make a convincing case that your research will make a positive difference — that you will produce an original and significant contribution. Discuss the **significance** of your research and explain its academic and/or community **value** within the context that you are proposing to undertake it. Try to answer the question of who will benefit from the research you propose to undertake.

The significance may be immediate and direct, or it may be indirect, involving an additional step of applying the results of your research. For example, if your research concerns second language learning, the significance may lie partly in pedagogic implications. The value may be specific to some particular institution or group, including of course the Department of English, the Faculty of Humanities, and The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, or it may be of some kind of national benefit.

## Outline of thesis

Give the proposed **outline** of your thesis, chapter by chapter. The nature and number of chapters will of course depend on the aims of your thesis, but the outline is likely to include chapters such as:

- Introduction [Aims of the research, background to the research]
- Literature review
- Theoretical foundation
- Methodology and research design
- Data collection
- Data analysis
- Data interpretation
- Conclusion [Summary of research, potential applications, shortcomings and potential future research]
- Appendices with data, analysis, etc. referred to in the main body of the thesis

The thesis outline you present here is, of course, not the final table of contents of the thesis. When you start documenting your research in the thesis, you will find that there will be good reasons for adjusting the organization of the presentation.

## References

Specify all the **items that you have referred** to in the body of your proposal, but do not include any publications that you have not referred to.

Make sure that you have followed the conventions of your chosen field of research, e.g. including page numbers of articles and book chapters where this is standard practice. One very good guide is the *Unified Style Sheet* proposed for linguistics journals, downloadable in pdf from:

<http://linguistlist.org/pubs/tocs/JournalUnifiedStyleSheet2007.pdf>

## Additional Resources

<http://www.learnerassociates.net/dissthes/>

<https://www.findaphd.com/advice/finding/writing-phd-research-proposal.aspx>

<https://www.soas.ac.uk/development/programmes/phd/guidelines-for-writing-a-research-proposal.html>

[http://www.exeter.ac.uk/media/universityofexeter/webteam/shared/postgraduate/pdfs/A Guide to Writing your PhD Proposal.pdf](http://www.exeter.ac.uk/media/universityofexeter/webteam/shared/postgraduate/pdfs/A%20Guide%20to%20Writing%20your%20PhD%20Proposal.pdf)

Naturally you have to draw on such material selectively since research proposals may vary considerably from one discipline to another.